

Opera: The Creative Expression of Italy

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...so long as people keep getting born Greek or French or Italian their culture-production will bear the unmistakable signature of the place.

Lawrence Durrell

The Geography of Italian Musical Creativity

A map of Italy showing the birthplaces of its principal composers reveals that nine of its twenty regions can boast of no one: Piedmont, Valle d'Aosta, Trentino-Alto Adige, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Umbria, Abruzzi, Molise, Basilicata, and Sardinia.¹ Four of the nine are border regions; most are mountainous. Two regions have produced one composer: Calabria, Cilea (1866–1950); Liguria, Paganini (1782–1840). Three regions have produced two: Sicily, Alessandro Scarlatti (1660–1725) and Bellini (1801–1835); Puglia, Paisiello (1740–1816) and Giordano (1867–1948); Latium, Palestrina (1525–1594) and Clementi (1752–1832). Two regions have produced three: Marche, Pergolesi (1710–1736), Spontini (1774–1851), Rossini (1792–1868); Campania, Domenico Scarlatti (1685–1757), Cimarosa (1749–1801), Leoncavallo (1857–1919). Emilia-Romagna produced four, Frescobaldi (1583–1643), Corelli (1653–1713), Verdi (1813–1901), Respighi (1879–1936). Two regions have produced five: Veneto, Gabrieli (1557–1612), Vivaldi (1678–1741), Salieri (1750–1825), Boito (1842–1918), Wolf-Ferrari (1876–1948); Lombardy, Monteverdi (1567–1643), Cavalli (1602–1676), Donizetti (1797–1848), Ponchielli (1834–1886), Menotti (1911–). Tuscany is in first place with seven: Lully (1632–1687), Cherubini (1760–1842), Boccherini (1743–1805), Puccini (1858–1924), Mascagni (1863–1945), Busoni (1866–1924), Castelnuovo-Tedesco (1895–1968).

In terms of the Italian boundaries fixed by the Congress of Vienna (1815), eight of the above composers would come from both the Papal States and the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies; one would come from the Kingdom of Sardinia.

Gammond's map omits significant composers from seven regions. Porpora (1686–1767), Jommelli (1714–1774), and Alfano (1876–1954) from Campania; Albinoni (1671–1750) and Malipiero (1882–1973) from the Veneto; Carissimi (1605–1674) and Petrassi (1904–) from Latium; Pizzetti (1880–1968) from Emilia; Mercadante (1795–1870) from Puglia;

Zandonai (1883–1944) from Trentino; Dallapiccola (1904–1975) from Friuli–Venezia Giulia. With these additions, the Veneto with seven shares first place with Tuscany. Campania occupies second place with six. Emilia-Romagna, with five, shares third place with Lombardy. Latium is in fourth place with four; Puglia, in fifth with three Trentino and Friuli-Venezia Giulia make the list with one each.

Peter Gammond's listing of the top sixty operas² gives a fair view of most of the world's great operas. The assessment was arrived at through calculations based on the number of LP issues of each opera balanced with the number of productions of each work in selected years at Covent Garden, London, and the Metropolitan Opera, New York. The listing does not pretend to be 100% scientifically accurate, but it is generally reliable. The list is confined to full-length operas with the obvious exception of *Cavalleria Rusticana* and *I Pagliacci*, which come so high in rating that they could hardly be ignored (they are in fourth and third place, respectively).

Three of the top five are Puccini operas (*La Bohème*, *Tosca* and *Madame Butterfly*, respectively). Nine of the top ten are Italian, with Verdi's *La Traviata*, *Aida* and *Rigoletto* in sixth, seventh, and ninth place, respectively, and Rossini's *Barber of Seville* in tenth place. Most operas are either Italian (26) or German/Austrian (21), followed by French (5), Russian (4) and others (4). The composers with more than one opera on the list are the following: Wagner (9), Verdi (8), Mozart and Puccini (5 each), Donizetti (4), Richard Strauss (3), Bellini and Bizet (2 each). No Wagner opera appears among the top 22. *The Flying Dutchman* (23rd) and *Tannhauser* (26th) are the two most popular Wagner operas; the others are placed well behind them. Mozart accounts for three of the top 20: *The Marriage of Figaro* (11th), *Così fan tutte* (12th), and *Don Giovanni* (13th). With *Il Trovatore* (14th) and *Un Ballo in Maschera* (16th), Verdi is the best represented composer among the top 20.

Italy was the birthplace and chief promoter of the opera tradition with influential centres in Rome, Naples, Milan, Florence, and Venice. It can claim more great composers of opera than any other country. During the second half of the sixteenth century a number of musicians and poets met together in the houses of two Florentine nobles, Giovanni de Bardi and Jacopi Corsi. They were nicknamed the "camerata" because of the room in which they met. They were interested in reviving the old Greek tragedies and performing them as near as possible to the original style. They knew that choruses had been sung or intoned but they had no idea of the type of music which the Greeks had employed. Their first experiments were naturally tentative, but they were assisted by various

composers, including Jacopo Peri who wrote the music for *Dafne* in 1597, which is generally acknowledged to have been the first opera. Unfortunately, the music has not survived but three years later Peri and his fellow composer Caccini both wrote settings of the poet Rinuccini's *Euridice* and Peri's score has been preserved. When the work was performed in Florence in 1600 it created a sensation.

Opera is the Italian word for "work." But, as an abbreviation of *opera in musica* (a "musical work"), it began to be used in seventeenth-century Italy for music dramas in which singers in costume enacted a story with instrumental accompaniment. The narrative element differentiated these pieces from earlier entertainments known as *intermedii*, or "interludes," which were written to celebrate weddings, birth days and similar events at the Italian courts, and incorporated lavish ballet and vocal sections.

Monteverdi—Creator of the Operatic Form

The first true masterpieces of this new art form, which was probably the most important cultural development of the seventeenth century, were by the Lombard composer Claudio Monteverdi (1567-1643). A chorister of Cremona Cathedral, in his native city, Monteverdi published sacred madrigals at the age of sixteen before entering the service of the Duke of Mantua as a viol player and singer. In 1595 he accompanied the Duke on a military campaign in Hungary and, four years later, a political mission to Flanders, where he met a number of French musicians. His musical development was influenced by the operas of the Camerata in Florence. His *Orfeo* of 1607, followed by *The Return of Ulysses* (1640) and *The Coronation of Poppea* (1642), took opera out of the court and into the public domain with music of great beauty and sophistication. Each work dictated its own form, with the music providing the dramatic weight. Brief arias (solo songs), madrigals (part songs), declaimed recitatives (sung speeches), duets, and ensembles were the materials that Monteverdi employed with extraordinary skill and originality. His work broke completely fresh ground, using great harmonic freedom and varied orchestral accompaniment. He laid the foundations for the modern orchestra. His place in the history of Renaissance music has been compared with that of Shakespeare in the history of drama.

In his later works Monteverdi began to rely increasingly on strings and woodwind. He became freer in his use of extended melodies and readier to introduce unexpected discords, which give his works a flavour decidedly different from the music of his predecessors and reasonably familiar to modern ears. His church music displays two contrasting trends: one following the traditional polyphonic style, the other tending

towards the newer baroque style of brilliant and expressive writing for solo voices and chorus. His *Vespers of the Blessed Virgin* (1610) runs the entire gamut of contemporary types of sacred music. The fact that Italian music has always favoured melody is obvious in the madrigals, masses, and operas of Monteverdi no less than in the melodious instrumental writing of Vivaldi and his violin concertos.

Quick to secure a foothold as fashionable entertainment, opera soon found regular venues throughout Italy. The first public opera house, the Teatro di San Cassiano, opened in Venice in 1637. By 1700 Venice had 17 theatres in which opera was performed. From there opera's popularity rapidly expanded. Almost 2,000 original compositions were first produced in eighteenth century Italy, an incredible feat for a society which formerly had no institutional entertainment at all to speak of. Italians flocked to the opera houses night after night for hours of entertainment. Before the appearance of Monteverdi, when there were no opera houses, only the rich and privileged were able to hear the early music dramas in the homes of the nobility.

Italian Pioneers in Instrumental Music

As well as providing the emerging vocal genres of opera, cantata and oratorio, Italy was the principal source of instrumental ensemble music throughout the seventeenth century. The development of the two major new instrumental genres of baroque, the sonata and the concerto, was largely the work of Italian composers.

The violinist Arcangelo Corelli (1653–1713) was perhaps the most gifted and influential of the pioneer composers of concertos and sonatas. His twelve *Concerti Grossi* (1712) established the form of the concerto grosso and were imitated throughout Europe. This musical form incorporates an interplay between a large body of instruments and a smaller one, each group usually consisting of strings, though sometimes with wind players also. Corelli and Handel were the two greatest exponents of this form. (Handel visited Corelli and Alessandro Scarlatti and became deeply imbued with Italian styles of vocal and instrumental writing.)

While Corelli's output was relatively small and limited to instrumental compositions, his later compatriots, the composer-priest Antonio Vivaldi (1678–1741) and Tommaso Albinoni (1671–1750) wrote prodigious amounts of vocal and instrumental music. Vivaldi is chiefly known for his development of the solo concerto, a work for one or more solo instruments and orchestra, usually in three movements following a quick-slow-quick pattern also employed by later composers. Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750) took to a summit of perfection this

and other forms that had developed in Italy during the seventeenth century. Vivaldi's set of violin concertos known as *The Four Seasons*—representing but four concertos of an output of more than 460—has become perhaps the best known of all baroque compositions. The publication of many of his concertos in his own lifetime enabled their influence to spread throughout Europe, and their three-movement structure became a model for composers of concertos. His contemporary, Bach, arranged twenty of his string concertos for keyboard.

In contrast with his sonatas and concertos, Vivaldi's many operas have never been successfully revived. A similar fate has befallen the 115 extant operas of the prolific Sicilian Alessandro Scarlatti (1660-1725). One of Scarlatti's important innovations was the three-movement form of the Italian opera overture or *sinfonia*, the earliest forerunner of the classical symphony. Scarlatti, founder of the Neapolitan school of opera, composed 500 chamber cantatas, 200 masses, and 14 oratorios. The new freedom of expression that Scarlatti brought to opera was given to harpsichord music by his son Domenico Scarlatti (1685-1757) whose 550 single-movement sonatas for harpsichord extended the technical and musical possibilities of keyboard writing.

Italian Pioneers in Religious Music

Baroque culture saw the beginnings of modern music. It created not only a new religious art, but also a new church music. This new art grew up in particularly close contact with the Counter-Reformation. It was St. Philip Neri (1515-1595), the friend of Palestrina (1525-1594), who instituted the oratorio, an ancestor of Italian opera. The oratorio is an extended setting of a religious libretto, usually on a biblical theme, for solo vocalists, chorus, and orchestra, and intended either for concert or church performance. The oratorio is an unstaged dramatic composition, usually without scenery, dresses, or action. The oratorio originated in the oratory of St. Philip Neri, from which it took its name. It was developed by Cavalieri (1550-1602), a member of the Florentine group of experimenters in the new art of opera. The score of his oratorio, *The Representation of Soul and Body*, looks like the score of the earliest operas. It was very much a religious opera with costumes, action, and even a final (optional) dance. Carissimi and Alessandro Scarlatti developed the oratorio. Carissimi introduced more instrumental variety into the oratorio. From the early eighteenth century the word "oratorio" has often been loosely applied to include works in the oratorio style but not treating of religious themes (e.g. Handel's *Semele*, 1743)

Palestrina, according to Luigi Barzini³, is the man who not only started Italian music on its glorious way but also had to save the newly

born creation from immediate death. The clerical authorities looked upon singing in churches with distaste. The Council of Trent, in its twenty-second session, on September 17, 1562, decided to "exclude from churches all such music that introduced anything impure or lascivious." Could music suggest anything but the impure and lascivious? Pius IV appointed a congregation of eight cardinals to look into the matter. Four of them were known to be determined to ban music from the churches. Palestrina, who had been the music director for Philip Neri's oratory, was asked to break the deadlock. He was asked to compose something which had never been tried before, an original mass in sober ecclesiastical style which would inspire strictly holy thoughts. If he failed, as everybody thought he would, the choral establishments of the Pontifical Chapel and all other church musical organizations would be disbanded and music excluded from religious services.

Palestrina had an apparently simple but almost impossible task. He was to invent a new form of art or to contemplate the ruin of his own life and the lives of all his colleagues. He composed the now famous *Mass of Pope Marcellus*. The cardinals heard it, were placated and convinced. Church music was saved for ever in its new form, and Italian music was founded at the same time. Palestrina's first publication was a book of masses, dedicated to the Pope, the first ever so dedicated by an Italian, for Flanders had for long supplied the capital of Christendom with its chief singers and composers (Dufay, Josquin des Pres, Willaert, Arcadelt, de Rore, Lassus). Palestrina was a prolific composer of masses, madrigals, motets and fine unaccompanied choral music of extraordinary quality. The Renaissance motet, a short choral polyphonic work setting Latin sacred texts for four to six voices, reached its summit in the compositions of Palestrina, Victoria, Byrd, and Tallis. The Venetians, Andrea Gabrieli (1510–1586) and his nephew and pupil Giovanni Gabrieli (1557–1612) developed a flamboyant polychoral style. Giovanni's motets featured a rich instrumental accompaniment, and made use of the antiphonal effects that it was possible to obtain in St. Mark's Cathedral in Venice, where the congregation was framed by two balconies.

Italian Opera Goes Abroad

Lully (1632–1687), son of a Florentine miller, is among the first of many great Italian musicians who found a home in France. His style as a strolling player so impressed a visitor that he was taken to France at fourteen where he worked in a noble household, eventually becoming leader of the resident string band. At twenty he moved into the service of Louis XIV as a ballet dancer and violinist, where he made a great

impression and received rapid advancement. In 1638 he began composing his own ballets, and within another four years was in charge of the whole royal musical establishment. In 1664 he began collaborating with Molière in producing comedy-ballets, then for the last fourteen years of his life concentrated on opera. Inasmuch as the Court dominated seventeenth century French music, Lully became for all practical purposes the founder of French opera. His *tragédies lyriques* written from 1673 onwards, form the first operatic repertory outside Italy. Later, Cherubini, Spontini, Rossini, and Donizetti all lived in Paris and contributed to the development of both grand and comic opera. By the beginning of the eighteenth century, Italian opera dominated Western Europe.

Opera—Metaphor for the Italian Way of Life

If symphonic music, in which conformity is valued and where order is important and rules are many, symbolizes the dynamics of German society, perhaps opera best symbolizes the Italian way of being in the world together with all others. If *bella figura* expresses the Italian ideal of looking good, *bel canto* expresses the Italian ideal of sounding good. Making a good impression is a combination of beauty in both appearance and sound.

The coloratura dimension of opera offers another clue to the Italian way of life: improvisation. Coloratura—the extemporaneous decoration of a vocal melody in the form of runs, roulades, and cadenzas, demands the ability to improvise. The composer leaves the improvisation to the skills and imagination of the singer. Italians interpret their law-makers as composers who presume their genius and skill for improvisation. Italian life is based on the coloratura principle. The law-maker, like the composer, does not specify everything. General guidelines should suffice for people with a genius for improvisation. The coloratura principle vexes and bewilders people from a legalistic, literal-minded and fundamentalist cultural background.

The function of the prima donna means that someone has to be centre-stage if there is going to be any opera at all. Significantly, it is a woman who acts as the organizing principle both for the music drama that is opera and the Italian way of life. Mama is not only chronologically but also psychologically the prima donna (“first lady”), the focus of Italian life. The mother of Jesus, the Madonna, is central to Italian religious life. Life without mama—the prima donna both in heaven and on earth—is inconceivable!

Opera is histrionic or theatrical. Even in the recitative, you do not speak; you declaim. The Italian language is not meant to be spoken; it

was created by people who declaim for people who declaim. Northern Europeans criticize Italians for being loud because they assume that languages are exclusively for speaking. But if life is opera, as it is for Italians, everybody on stage and in the audience has to hear you; otherwise life/opera does not work. If life is theatrical, to be is to be performing. Life is not so much action as acting. The only real statement is overstatement.

Melody, so much at the heart of Italian opera, offers another clue to the Italian way of life. As that sweet or agreeable arrangement of sounds and rhythmic succession of single tones organized into an aesthetic whole, melody expresses the demand that life be beautiful; consequently, its disparate elements must be integrated, composed, and harmonized. The quintessential Italian favouring of melody in music expresses a quest for simplicity and harmony within the welter of human complexity, based on the assumption that the only simplicity that counts is that which results from mastering complexity. The good opera/life entails the ability to orchestrate complexity according to some freely chosen plot/melody line. Significantly, many of the most melodious Italian operas were written when Italy was dominated by foreign powers and ransacked by invading armies. The ability of Italians to create melodies in these times of adversity suggests the power of some pre-conceptual sharing of “heavenly voices”, akin to that of Joan of Arc, inspiring them with the hope of working through the chaos about them. Where there is melody there is hope and Italian opera. Verdi’s stirring youthful music became a symbol of the Italian people’s desire for freedom, but it was also because of its fervour, melodiousness and dramatic power that *Nabucco* was performed not only in Italy but also within a decade in cities as far afield as Berlin, Constantinople, St. Petersburg, and London.

But as you get to know Europe slowly, tasting the wines, cheeses and characters of the different countries you begin to realize that the important determinant of any culture is after all—the spirit of place.

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- 1 Peter Gammond, *The Harmony Illustrated Encyclopedia of Classical Music* (New York, 1988) p. 130–131.
- 2 Peter Gammond, *The Harmony Illustrated Encyclopedia of Classical Music* (New York, 1988) p. 90.
- 3 Luigi Barzini, *The Italians* (London, 1964) p. 307.